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# Review of "Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy" by P. Stanfield

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of the Southwest—inevitably limits the study's effectiveness. He might have focused a little more on the diversity of expressions of regional identification that fall under his Southwestern umbrella and on how they have changed over time. Do the overwhelmingly urban residents of this enormous region (stretching roughly 1,500 miles from east Texas to the California coast—about a third of the landmass of the trans-Mississippi U.S. West and home to more than half of its residents) really share, or have they ever shared, a regional heritage? And do Southwesterners, as a collective whole (however we define their region), really identify more closely with their environment than do residents of other regions?

Bryant suggests that the Southwest's "internal regional identification solidified with the movement of Texans and Oklahomans to California, New Mexico, and Arizona" (p. 171) in the 1940s and 1950s. And he points to "ties . . . between Southern California and the artist colonies in Santa Fe and Taos," along with the writings of Larry McMurtry, "that ranged geographically from the Pacific Coast to the 'third coast' of Texas" (p. 216), as additional sources of regional unification. He further notes that "a new awareness of the region emerged by the 1980s, much of this consciousness resulting from the rich sounds of the many voices echoing across the Southwest." But in the end, such claims concerning shared regional consciousness are vague and unconvincing. Nonetheless, the book's thorough and detailed synthesizing of architectural, artistic, and literary developments from Dallas to Los Angeles (and all the major cities in between) over the course of more than a century makes *Culture in the American Southwest* a valuable study.

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

DAVID M. WROBEL

*Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy.* By Peter Stanfield. (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2002. 154 pp. \$37.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper)

The mindset of the 1930s "Singing Cowboy" movie hero was summed up (somewhat exaggeratedly) in this 1997 newspaper account: "Them bandits have beaten my mother, ravished my girl, burned down my house, killed my cattle and blinded my best friend. I'm goin' to get 'em if it's the last thing I do. But first folks, I'm going to sing you a little song" (p. 2).

Peter Stanfield has ridden to the rescue of the singing cowboy, the hero of a subgenre of Western movies "that scholarly histories of the genre have roundly ignored" (p. 1). His book is based on an im-

pressive array of archival, published primary, and recently published secondary sources. *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* critically examines the singing cowboy's literary origins, his inheritance from silent movies, the musicology of his performances, and the 1930s Depression-era historical context in which he flourished.

Stanfield's study of these "series westerns" carefully delineates the career of Gene Autry, alongside the careers of Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter, Eddie Dean, Jimmy Wakely, Rex Allen, and others. Stanfield argues that the singing cowboy became an unwashed hero "for the mob" (p. 3) of the Great Depression because he was descended from postbellum dime novel cowboy heroes. He was not descended from Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), an example of what Stanfield terms the Western hero's "embourgeoisement" (p. 3). Further, the singing cowboy's music owed more to blackface minstrel "coon songs" (p. 51) than to other sources. Most importantly, the singing cowboy became a proletarian movie hero because his stories dramatically juxtaposed "labor and capital" (p. 154). The singing cowboy was thus "one of the most important characters to emerge from the tumultuous years of the Great Depression" (p. 3).

Stanfield's work is reflective of contemporary scholarship that ignores classic monographs while simultaneously politicizing the study of folk and popular culture. The author fails to delineate the antebellum low culture origins of the Western folk hero—the Southwestern tales of Davy Crockett and Mike Fink so thoroughly explored by Michael Lofaro, Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, and Constance Rourke. The author has either not read Henry Nash Smith or has chosen to view the myth of the West solely through the dark lens of Richard Slotkin. Absent is any serious discussion of (or reference to scholarly work on) the "Cowboy Code," a historic and folkloric value system crucial to understanding fully Texan Gene Autry's demeanor and mystique. Stanfield's discussion of country and western music, while ambitious, is uninformed by the work of Bill Malone, a pioneer in that field of study. Finally (and amazingly), William Savage's path-breaking *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (1979), is never cited.

As noted, the most important conclusion of *Horse Opera* is that the 1930s singing cowboy hero appealed to "working class audiences . . . by emphasizing story themes that were either covertly or overtly concerned with the struggle between labor and capital" (p. 154). Some postmodernist or Marxist literary critics might agree. Yet hundreds of thousands of 1930s and 1940s moviegoers (and millions of today's viewers of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers on Bravo Cable's Premium Western Channel) were, and are, drawn to the singing cow-

boy because of their overt approval of his Cowboy Code values and traits. These folkloric traits, as Richard M. Dorson, Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, and many others have noted, include individualism, democracy, freedom, courage, mobility, anti-intellectualism, loyalty, adaptiveness, hospitality, libertarianism, and forcefulness.

Despite its failings, *Horse Opera* is the first monograph to focus on this important subject. Scholars interested in the role of myth in Western movies and music should consult this book.

*University of Washington, Tacoma*

MICHAEL ALLEN

*My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965.* Becky M. Nicolaides. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002. xviii + 412 pp. \$65 cloth, \$24 paper)

Until recently urban historians viewed pre-1940 suburbanization as involving only the upper and middle classes, with the working class arriving after World War II. They also focused on initial suburban development, ignoring maturation. Becky Nicolaides's pathbreaking study, *My Blue Heaven*, helps correct these oversights and provides fine insight into the dynamics of a white working-class suburb's transformation from a community of poor families seeking survival in the difficult economies of the 1920s and 1930s to the racialized and defensive community of middle-class, blue-collar workers in the 1950s and 1960s. Answering the question "how did the social, community, and economic setting of modern workers influence their political beliefs and behaviors," Nicolaides found "the seeds of working-class conservatism were sown in the earlier period" (p. 2).

The book focuses on the Los Angeles suburb of South Gate and the neighboring communities of Huntington Park, Bell Gardens, Lynwood, Walnut Park, and Maywood. Located seven miles south of downtown, South Gate shared a common border with Watts. South Gate emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as a town of "blue-collar and low-level white-collar workers" whose limited resources led them to self-build tiny homes; unlike many middle- and upper-class suburbanites, by 1929 over 75 percent were homeowners (p. 57). Many South Gate families lived in garages or tents while building their houses; they also relied on self-provisioning (back-yard gardens) and informal neighborhood support while opposing infrastructure development and tax increases. Their lives revolved around family and church; few developed "meaningful social ties in the workplace" or a "consumer culture" (pp. 79, 96). South Gaters em-